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ON ORPHANS AND SEMI-ORPHANS

Nakul

His head pokes around the door at the back of the church sanctuary, where we are teaching English, the empty buff-colored walls echoing from our own voices and those of the street vendors below, morning calls sliding upward and between barred windows, which are open to add light to the incandescence overhead. The boy quietly shuffles in, his hand at his waist to keep aloft his brown pants. He gives them a heave and simultaneously hops onto a hard wooden bench in the middle column, still set from service yesterday, scooting back on the seat until his legs swing half a meter above the floor. Sits. Watches. My sister, waiting for our students to identify nouns and verbs in their notebooks, swivels in her equally adamantine seat toward Nakul. Slowly, her right arm creeps upward. Her mahogany eye closes as her hand sweeps over it, then, pop, into her mouth the right eye has disappeared, and Nakul and I can watch it rolling around behind her cheek. He looks a bit worried. But Megan spits into her hand, reaches up and, voila! the eye appears back in its socket. His own obsidian orbs widen, and then he smiles, timidly revealing sharp teeth.

This child is very bad, we have been told – always using abusing words and actually hitting the older children, like when he pummeled Ramesh during church.

In another week Nakul will rely on us for defense; shoved out of the way by older children's games, he will scuffle, wailing, to one of us and reach bony arms upward, pleading for comfort, slacks slipping dangerously low on his pelvis. He will arrange his fuzzy head on my shoulder and stare off toward the green mountain, occasionally wiping snotty nose with his hand and then patting my cheek. Scents of dust and pee and the bland odor of rice will waft up to my nose. His terra-cotta skin would match exactly that of my older sister's two mixed sons, I am certain. His own elder sister will glare at him, and he will scowl back for a moment before turning his head to my other shoulder. Does she blame her four-year-old brother for their mother running off with another man, leaving their father to place them here? Or perhaps it is me? Perhaps I have committed some cultural anathema by holding him, by wiping away his tears?

Ramesh

Ramesh is eight, though you would never guess it. He looks up by a head even to Seema, and she younger by a year. He too, we have heard, is a very bad boy, and very strong. He never cries. My favorite picture of Ramesh shows him arms crossed, lips lifted in a slight smirk, against the beige wall of the church. Sweater – tiger-orange, v-neck, fuzzy – rakishly askew. His bravado mimics the terrorist leader he dreams of becoming, but for now he is all boy, entirely eight. He could go to work with my Dad and footrace against forklifts in the six-acre warehouse and drink kiwi slushies from the Marathon on breaks.

We learn in VBS about Adam naming the animals, and each of the eight children, whether created male or female, will have the chance to identify their comrades' imitations of mysterious creatures. We send Ramesh to Suryavanshi, our first Adam, and snicker as he rushes, prances, and growls his four-legged way across a rug laid on the chilly cement floor, between benches and the raised pulpit platform. "A sher!" the children shout. "Didi, in English, tiger," one confirms, though we have already guessed. Now Seema's turn to be Adam. One by one, she titles them mouse, dog, bird, snake, elephant, rabbit, and… well, Ramesh is a tiger again. Seven of eight times he is a tiger, his flamboyant sweater only lacking the stripes.

Seema

Eight-thirty p.m., and upstairs steaming cauldrons of rice and vegetable garnish the table at the back of sanctuary where the children eat. The others have already clambered up the stone stairs and are clattering plates on planks of the table, but Seema remains in her room, scrounging through clothes, bedding, backpacks. "Where is my plate?!" she repeats frantically, tossing Mohini's sunshiny frills to a top bunk. Her panic has voiced itself in her second language, diction faultless, vowels slightly elongated. If she cannot find her plate, there will be no food for her, and if she does not find it soon Gopal may not find it in his heart to spoon any of the remaining rice or vegetable toward her desolate dish.

I don't know, Seema, where your plate is. You shouldn't have to look far; the room is only three meters square. Shadows cover the two sets of bunks which you share with five others, but how far could your gleaming silver plate have gone? You used it last at breakfast. I stand pressed against the cool metal post of the far bunk, lifting my feet so she can check under the bed to sort through an English text, a pair of saddle shoes, someone's school tie. An odd desire to laugh bubbles into my throat, a weirdly sympathetic reaction. Poor scatterbrained Seema. I

shift my gaze out to the dank hallway, imagining Seema with my Mom to cuddle and dance and prepare gala tea parties with her.

A gasp from below. I scan the floor, where Seema has almost disappeared beneath the bunk. Suddenly a wide sterling disk appears, the child close behind. Run, Seema. Blow the dust and cockroaches off your dish and see if there is any dal left.

Sonam

The first time I see Sonam, he is being scolded by Deborah; probably he deserves it. Arms laced across the chest, torso rigid, mouth set in that obdurate streak that so characterizes thirteen-year-old boys. Deborah's Hindi screeches to a halt, and I discern without a translator that she is demanding an explanation. He offers none, but continues to stare past the short tawny table, murky eyes focused on the cracked russet paint of the cement floor. He reminds me of a violin student I once had, a boy who would not play in time until I drew a parade of deer crossing his music and instructed him to shoot only the first, third, and fourth. The kind of kid who would be better off shooting baskets with my brother than answering such irrelevant questions.

At the top of my stack of photos rests a self-portrait by Sonam. His oiled ebony hair eclipses a glaring bulb, but fingers of light reach halfway around his face, highlight folds of skin, early crow's feet where he is winking at the camera. Already at thirteen he is handsome; eyes and nose perfectly symmetrical, mouth constantly quirked sideways, charming, mocking, delighting, defying. Ears spread maybe a little too wide. No chin, but that's only in the picture. I hear the chortle that escapes as he turns my sister's digital camera around to inspect his image. Then the screen blanks – low battery – and he gingerly rests it on the bench, returns to his notebook, grips his eraserless pencil decisively. Meticulously he sketches the bubble outline of letters, memorized hieroglyphs from our Latin alphabet. P-L-A-Y-B-O-Y. He loops and shades until the graphic is logo-worthy, then moves down the page and I watch as a human hand emerges, an almost-fist, middle finger extended. Accurate, eloquent, irrefutable.

"Didi – Didi, there are eight of us. How many – " their spokeswoman falters, determined to use correct English syntax – "how many of us can you take home with you to America?" Didi – it means elder sister, a term of respect, and from them, affection. I shake my head, pretending not to understand, incapable of explaining immigration laws and fifteen-hour plane trips, unable to change their lives.